

**Testimony Before the United States Senate Committee
on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry
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Thank you for giving us at the Food Research and Action Center (FRAC) the opportunity to testify here today on the reauthorization of the child nutrition programs, with a special focus on the community-based programs. Our testimony will concern the nutrition programs for infants and preschoolers, and for school-aged children in the out of school hours.

These programs are:

The Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children – the program almost universally known as (and admired as) “WIC.”

The Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP), which provides federal funds for nutrition for preschoolers in family child care homes, child care centers, and Head Start programs. CACFP also provides federal support for meals for children in domestic violence and homeless shelters.

The afterschool food programs – CACFP provides support for snacks and suppers in afterschool programs; and the National School Lunch Program supports afterschool snacks in school-sponsored afterschool programs.

The Summer Food Service Program (SFSP), which pays for meals and snacks for low-income children in summer programs operated by schools, other public agencies like parks and recreation departments, community-based non-profits, and other sponsors.

This Committee has had a long and effective bipartisan approach to the nation’s nutrition investments. You, Mr. Chairman, and Senators Harkin, Lugar and Leahy have helped lead the way to protecting and strengthening the child nutrition and food stamp programs.

Similarly, the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, with leadership from you and Senator Kohl, has put together a series of positive child nutrition initiatives since the last full child nutrition reauthorization in 1998. Part of our testimony today will be about the need to build on those initiatives and pilots in summer food, school breakfast, and afterschool supper programs, among others.

We at the Food Research and Action Center look forward to working with this Committee, the entire Congress and the Administration to produce the best possible bill.

We also want to acknowledge the leadership and initiatives that Undersecretary Bost and his team at USDA have provided over the last two years – working hard to expand programs, simplify administration, and implement changes enacted by Congress in 1998 and since to boost summer, breakfast and afterschool participation, to reduce paperwork and to assure that more children in need get the benefits of these wonderful programs.

The child nutrition programs are just about the most effective federal investments that exist. As you proceed in reauthorization, we urge the Committee to remember at every point the enormous positive impact the programs have had in recent decades, are having now, and can have in the future on the physical, emotional, developmental, educational and economic well-being of low-income children, their families and their communities. A well-conceived reauthorization bill can build from these strengths. A well-conceived reauthorization bill can help the nation reach many important national goals – not just reducing childhood hunger and food insecurity, but improving prenatal care and child nutrition and health, enhancing early development, raising the quality of child care, strengthening rural communities and boosting rural development, increasing jobs and entrepreneurial opportunities, improving the achievement of children in school, providing safe havens for children in out-of-school hours, supporting welfare-to-work efforts, and providing critical help to the working poor.

This reauthorization is also a chance to build on the programs' strengths in order to tackle new health, demographic and workforce realities. As one example, many more low-income parents are working longer hours or nontraditional shifts. The need for before-school care, afterschool care that runs into the evening, and summer activities has become far greater, and therefore the need to adjust the nutrition programs to feed children in these hours has become urgent as well.

Similarly, the growing incidence of childhood obesity requires the reauthorization process to address how the programs can be strengthened in order to reduce obesity. As this Committee knows, there has been a tremendous increase in childhood obesity in recent years. This is terribly worrisome. Helping schools and out-of-school programs purchase more fruits and vegetables is one solution to the problem. But improving children's access to the nutrition programs is another. A range of studies show that children in the federally-funded programs eat more healthily than children who do not – who bring food from home in brown bags, or eat at home, or don't eat at all.

A handful of people have alleged that the nutrition programs provide too much food to children and contribute in that way to obesity. All the evidence is to the contrary. The studies show that children eating school breakfasts eat more healthily than other children. Children eating food under the CACFP program in preschools and child care centers eat more healthily than other children. The programs have healthy portion sizes – this is not where "supersizing" occurs.

Certainly the food choices that some schools or community programs make could be improved. Congress could help by increasing program resources, as well as by limiting the availability in schools of less healthy food, from other sources, that competes with the better food in the federal programs. But obesity is not a result of poor families or schools or community programs having too many resources for too much food. To say otherwise is just willfully ignoring the facts: the WIC food package for a child is worth \$40 per month; the federal support for an afterschool snack is 58 cents per child per day; the food in a school breakfast costs \$1.17

or less; in a school lunch, \$2.14 or less. (And the average food stamp allotment is 79 cents per meal per person.)

Indeed, emerging evidence shows that, among low-income people, hunger and food insecurity and obesity are tied together. Obesity can be, for the poor, an adaptive response to hunger, when poor people are unable to consistently get enough to eat throughout the month, so they eat more than they normally would during the periods that food is available. Low-income families and programs for children not only have limited resources but also often face limited food choices and higher prices in their neighborhoods. Resource constraints, not too much resources, are contributing to obesity.

The child nutrition programs contribute to reducing obesity in another way. By helping to fund, expand and improve recreation and other programs after school and in the summer, the programs keep children active and engaged, rather than sitting at home eating in front of a television. For example, nineteen out of twenty summer food programs are connected to some recreational or other activity. One study in California traced some obesity among low-income teens to the lack of organized afterschool programs and the teens' fear of being out in their unsafe community in unsupervised ways – these young girls just stayed at home to be safe. They need afterschool programs with good nutrition in them.

Before getting to specific recommendations, there are two other broad points I would like to make that apply to all of the community-based nutrition programs. First, many of the afterschool, summer and child care programs I will be discussing are operated by non-profits – frequently by faith-based groups. For example, some of the food banks that are part of America's Second Harvest are key providers of nutrition in afterschool programs. In some cases it is considerably harder to operate these programs if you are a non-profit than if you are a public agency. Some of our recommendations are to make it easier for community-based non-profits to participate.

Second, while I am here to testify about the community-based programs, the rules governing school breakfast and lunch are important factors in the health of the community programs. (A fuller list of our recommendations for all programs, including school-based programs, is in the appendix to our written testimony.)

For example, we continually hear from local officials how desperately children need school breakfast and lunch programs. Mayor Menino of Boston talks about how his city's schools try hard not to close on snow days if only because the low-income children so desperately need the food; and that the schools try to feed the children more on Friday before they go home to empty cupboards, and on Monday when they come in to school particularly ravenous. In Oregon this spring, as the fiscal crisis forces schools to operate only four days per week or add extra weeks of vacation, administrators and parents are deeply concerned not only about the educational damage but also the harm to hungry children when school meals programs aren't operating and the summer and other programs have to pick up the slack. These concerns

underline how critically important the community-based programs are to children after school and in the summer, and to pre-schoolers all day and year-round.

Also, some remedies to the so-called school lunch “overcertification” problem, if not the right ones, could harm the community programs as well. We believe both that the numbers being tossed around about “overcertification” are exaggerated and that some proposed remedies would drive substantial numbers of eligible children out of the program. (That position also is detailed in an attachment to our testimony.) But because one key entry point to federal nutrition funds for community-based programs turns on the number of children in the community eligible for free and reduced price school meals (when 50 percent of the children in the geographic area are eligible for free or reduced price school lunch, then preschoolers in the area are eligible for CACFP, and children in the area are eligible for summer food and afterschool snacks), any approach that inappropriately depresses school lunch participation will have negative “domino effects” in the community programs.

The school and community programs are also closely linked for preschoolers. As “universal preschool” programs grow in the years ahead, more and more young children will be spending part of the day in public schools and part of the day in child care. Making sure that providers can provide breakfast, lunch, snacks and suppers in a co-ordinated way to preschoolers in full day programs that operate both in schools and the community will be particularly important.

Our testimony details a range of changes that we urge Congress to make because they are important to the improvement of the child nutrition programs. It reviews each program, that program’s critical strengths, and priority improvements in that program. But it may help if we summarize at the outset some of the highest priority, modest cost, priorities for reauthorization this year.

Urgent Priorities for New Investments in Child Nutrition Reauthorization

1. Improving the Summer Food Service Program by making the "Lugar" Summer Food Pilots nationwide for all sponsors. Everyone agrees that more children need summer meals, but the program is hard to operate. In 2000, Congress initiated a pilot program (proposed by Senator Lugar) that allowed 13 states and Puerto Rico to improve use of the Summer Food Service Program by simplifying cost accounting requirements for public sponsors (e.g., schools, government agencies), thereby reducing paperwork and allowing *de facto* a modestly higher reimbursement for meals and snacks provided under the program. Summer food participation increased by almost nine percent between 2000 and 2001 in the pilot states, reversing three consecutive years of declines. In contrast, participation decreased in the rest of the nation by more than three percent. There is broad support for expanding the pilots nationwide to all states, and to all sponsors (both public and private nonprofit).

2. Improving the area eligibility test from 50 percent to 40 percent. For many children

program eligibility depends on the proportion of children in their geographic area (usually the school catchment area) eligible for free and reduced price school lunch. In summer food, afterschool snacks, and CACFP for preschoolers in family child care, providers are eligible for full reimbursement if 50 percent of children in the area are free or reduced-price eligible. The test used to be considerably better for summer food (33 1/3 percent), and also, until 1996, for CACFP (all children in the program were eligible for the highest reimbursement). The 50 percent test has a particularly negative impact in rural areas, and also has pushed major declines in CACFP family child care participation. Making the test 40 percent (a change Congress made last year in the Title I education programs and the 21st Century Community Learning Centers afterschool program) would be an important step forward.

3. Making school breakfasts available to more children. Only 43 low-income children in the U.S. eat school breakfast for every 100 who eat school lunch. School breakfast programs are critical to student achievement, and recent studies show that offering breakfast free of charge to all children in a school, rather than just to the low-income children, further improves student achievement, behavior and attendance. It does so in part by pulling more low-income children into breakfast as the stigma applied to a program otherwise seen as being "just for poor kids" is removed. Different strategies need to be tried here, including: (1) making breakfast available at no cost to all children in a targeted set of schools – those that already have high percentages of children receiving free and reduced price meals (i.e., lower income schools, especially at the high school level where the stigma is greatest); and (2) providing funds for breakfast expansion and start-up efforts.

4. Making suppers available at afterschool programs in low-income areas. As TANF and changes in the economy and other public programs result in longer hours of work and often work in nontraditional hours for low-income parents, afterschool programs more and more have to operate into the early evening. Seven states can currently use federal nutrition funds to pay for suppers as well as snacks for all the children in afterschool programs in low-income areas. This pilot has been very successful, and should now be extended to all states. It helps provide what parents and children need: programs that offer a safe place with nutritious food and a caring environment for all the hours parents are at work and commuting.

5. Increasing access to the Child and Adult Care Food Program. CACFP is a key support for quality affordable care for school age and preschool children. It provides reimbursements for meals and snacks, nutrition standards and training. CACFP sponsors supporting nutrition in family child care need more help for their quality improvement and nutrition education efforts. Also, for-profit child care centers have as a general rule not been eligible to participate in CACFP, but in recent years those for-profit centers with 25 percent or higher of the children being low-income have been eligible through a yearly appropriations process. Such year-to-year decisions make planning harder and discourage participation. The rule should be made permanent. USDA's evaluation of the original for-profit center demonstration project showed that centers participating in the food program began serving complete breakfasts, more fresh fruits, and higher quality meals. The for-profit participation is particularly helpful in Southern

states.

6. Making all children in homeless shelters eligible for reimbursements for meals and snacks through CACFP. Currently homeless shelters can be reimbursed for meals and snacks served to homeless children in residence up to the age of 12 years. It makes sense to extend this provision up to the age of 18, to help shelters serving vulnerable runaways, and to provide meals for all children whose families reside in homeless and domestic violence shelters.

The remainder of our testimony reviews the strengths of each of the child nutrition programs that functions primarily through community-based providers, and gives recommendations in more detail.

Afterschool Food

Afterschool experts agree that food is a very important part of any afterschool program, but it is also a very costly part. USDA's afterschool snack and supper funds provide the means for local programs to give children the nutrition they need to continue learning after a long day at school. Additionally, the food acts as a magnet drawing children and youth into quality educational and enrichment programs that keep them safe and out of trouble during the afterschool hours when they are most likely to commit crimes, be the victims of crime, experiment with drugs and alcohol, or become pregnant.

While the afterschool snack program pre-dates 1998, the 1998 child nutrition reauthorization act made federal funds for snacks available to afterschool programs with less paperwork and expanded eligibility. The Child and Adult Care Food Program was changed to allow afterschool programs located in low-income areas where 50 percent or more of the children are eligible for free or reduced-price school meals to feed school-age children 19 and under a snack. Schools were given the option of providing snacks to children age 18 and under through the National School Lunch Program, on the same area eligibility basis, which substantially decreased the paperwork for schools.

Over the past few years, Congress also created an afterschool supper pilot program for seven states –Delaware, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, New York, Oregon, and Pennsylvania. The suppers are available through the Child and Adult Care Food Program under the same area eligibility rules as snacks, also for children 19 and under. Programs operating for more than three hours can serve a supper and a snack.

To ensure that afterschool programs are able to provide the nutrition children need, the afterschool supper program needs to be expanded nationwide. Almost 15 percent of all men and 11 percent of all women who are full-time wage or salary workers with children under the age of 18 (over 5.2 million parents) work evenings, nights, a rotating or split shift schedule, or on an employer-determined irregular schedule, and this number will only increase as more women make the transition from welfare to work and often do so through jobs that require non-standard hours. Many





afterschool programs are operating longer hours or running later to meet the needs of low-income working parents, which require that children receive a supper in addition to or instead of a snack.

By providing a meal, afterschool programs are more likely to give children in care for several hours the nutrition their bodies need. A more substantial amount of food is even more important for teenagers, who are wholly ineligible under federal rules for suppers except in the seven pilot states.

This supper pilot is only available through the Child and Adult Care Food Program, but not through the National School Lunch Program (for school-sponsored afterschool programs). We ask the Committee both to make the supper program available in all states, and to expand it to allow schools to provide such meals through the National School Lunch Program. It is extremely burdensome for schools to use CACFP for suppers – to participate in multiple child nutrition programs.

Another change that is crucial to improving access to afterschool snacks and suppers, as discussed earlier, is to decrease the area eligibility test from 50 percent to 40 percent. Making this change is especially important for rural communities that do not have the same pockets of poverty found in urban areas. Due to the large catchment areas of rural schools, even communities with considerable poverty have trouble meeting the 50 percent test. Lowering the threshold to 40 percent would also bring the program in line with federal education programs designed to serve low-income children, such as 21st Century Community Learning Centers, which are exactly the programs that should be utilizing afterschool snacks and suppers. Indeed, such centers should have categorical eligibility for afterschool and summer nutrition programs so they would have less paperwork and could help more children.

There are a number of other steps that need to be taken to expand participation and ease administrative burdens. Many programs and schools report that the afterschool snack reimbursement does not cover the costs of providing the snack. A modest increase in reimbursement is badly needed.

As mentioned, programs receiving federal funds (directly or through state or local agencies) to operate afterschool or summer programs should be automatically eligible to participate in the afterschool snacks and suppers program and the Summer Food Service Program, and required to participate as a condition of receiving the underlying federal assistance. Similarly, summer food sites should be automatically eligible for afterschool snacks and suppers if they operate during the school year. Currently, the eligibility rules are slightly more expansive for summer food.

Summer Food Service Program

Working parents across the nation are concerned about what their children do when school lets out for the summer. Families struggling to make ends meet face additional worries – without

access to the regular school meal programs, they may not have enough food during the summer for their children to eat well, or sometimes at all. Food banks report significant increases in requests for emergency food from families with children during the summer. Fortunately, the Summer Food Service Program (SFSP) is available to fill this gap. The SFSP reimburses schools, local governments, nonprofit organizations, and others for meals and snacks served to low-income children when school is not in session.

The benefits of the SFSP extend beyond nutritious meals. A USDA evaluation showed that 95 percent of summer food sites provide activities for children as well as nutrition. Children left unsupervised have an increased risk of getting into trouble, and research shows that summer enrichment programs can improve student achievement. Yet school districts nationwide are facing budget cuts that will reduce or eliminate their summer programs, even though school districts are coming under more pressure to ensure that all students meet standardized testing goals. In this context, summer programs are essential to leveling the playing field for all students. The meal reimbursements from the SFSP provide crucial and dependable financial support and draw children to these important summer activities.

On a typical school day, approximately 15.9 million low-income children participate in the National School Lunch Program. Yet on a typical day in July 2002, only about 1.9 million children participated in the SFSP. State agency directors and staff responsible for SFSP coordination tell FRAC the top obstacle is that paperwork is too burdensome. To ease paperwork and increase participation in the SFSP, Senator Richard Lugar sponsored and Congress enacted a pilot project in 13 states and Puerto Rico that began in 2001. The first two summers of the pilot show that, taken as a whole, the pilot jurisdictions increased the number of children participating in the SFSP, reversing three consecutive years of decline before the pilot began, while participation in other states fell. To build upon this success and encourage greater participation in the SFSP, Congress should make the Lugar pilots national and available to all SFSP sponsors.

Another top obstacle to SFSP participation cited in the FRAC survey of local officials was “Area eligibility percentage is too high,” referring to the fact that sites cannot qualify as “open sites” for the SFSP unless at least 50 percent of the children in the area are low income. The test used to be 33 1/3 percent. The No Child Left Behind Act lowered the percentage of children from low-income families required for schools to be eligible for Title I school wide funding from 50 percent to 40 percent. So, not only would more communities be eligible to have SFSP sites, especially in rural areas, if the area eligibility threshold for SFSP participation were lowered from 50 percent to 40 percent, but changing the percentage to 40 percent would also bring harmonization across programs that provide educational and nutritional funds to communities in need.

Sponsors and sites also would be more likely to participate if special funds were made available to reach underserved areas. These funds could help pay for transportation, start-up and outreach costs faced by programs, especially those in rural areas.

CACFP

The Child and Adult Care Food Program is key to good nutrition and quality affordable child care which allows children to develop fully, prepares children to enter school ready to learn, and helps low-income parents work. The program provides reimbursement for food and meal preparation costs, ongoing training in the nutritional needs of children, and on-site technical assistance in meeting the program's strong nutritional requirements. Each working day, the Child and Adult Care Food Program provides high quality nutrition and learning experiences for more than 2.7 million children in family child care homes, child care centers and Head Start programs. (Family child care providers operate a licensed or regulated child care business in their homes.)

CACFP is a well documented success. Research has shown that children in child care participating in CACFP receive more nutritious meals and snacks. Studies also have shown that participation in CACFP is an indicator of quality family child care. This is especially important to help meet the increased need for quality affordable care to support the efforts of families moving from welfare to work.

Child care plays a central role in shaping the nutrition habits of young children. Since many of the habits learned in the preschool years will last a lifetime, access to CACFP should be increased as a way of helping to make sure these nutrition habits are good ones. CACFP helps keep child to provider ratios low, gives parents nutrition education, and provides a great deal of provider-parent contact.

The need for affordable quality care is growing, and the need for good nutritious meals and healthy habits has never been greater; we urge Congress to make the targeted improvements needed to reach the millions of children who could benefit from CACFP but are currently unserved. Those improvements are needed in CACFP in family child care, in early education programs, and in centers.

Family Child Care:

As part of the 1996 welfare law, the CACFP unitary reimbursement rate system in family child care was dismantled and replaced with a two-tiered, means-tested system. As a result of the means test, reimbursement rates for nutrition for children from families with income over 185 percent of the poverty level were cut in half.

Before the implementation of the means test, the family child care portion of CACFP was one of the fastest growing federal food programs. Since the implementation of the means test, the number of family child care homes, children, and meals and snacks served in family child care homes through CACFP has been declining steadily – far beyond what Congress anticipated in 1996.

Since the implementation of the means test, there has been a 14 percent drop in the number of family child care homes participating in CACFP, and a 7 percent drop in the number of children and meals and snacks served through CACFP in family child care homes. In fact, in comparison to USDA projections of what growth would have been in CACFP in family child care homes without the means test, the program served a quarter of a billion fewer meals and snacks in FY 2002 than was expected. These drops happened even while the number of low-income children with parents in the workforce rose rapidly. And when homes drop out of CACFP, often they then are not monitored and revert back to an unregulated status.

We are not today recommending elimination of the means test, but we do recommend helping working families work by clearing away some of the unnecessary paperwork, making critical adjustments to the system and providing support for reaching out to bring CACFP to more child care providers and children.

We need to improve CACFP's ability to reach low-income families by reducing the area eligibility threshold in family child care from 50 percent to 40 percent. Currently, areas qualify if the local school has at least 50 percent of the children qualifying for free and reduced price lunch (families with income below 185 percent of the poverty level), a level difficult for some areas to meet. A state-funded CACFP quality initiative in Washington state which extended higher reimbursement rates to homes in areas with schools meeting the 40 percent cut off increased the number of eligible neighborhoods by 40 percent. Expanding area eligibility is particularly important for reaching family child care providers in rural areas. The distribution of poverty in rural communities makes meeting the 50 percent area eligibility cut-off more difficult than in highly concentrated urban areas.

We also need to assure that CACFP sponsors (the non-profit organizations that administer CACFP to family child care home providers) have the resources needed to focus on important nutrition education and support services that have been pushed aside by an avalanche of means test paperwork. CACFP sponsoring organizations' per home administrative reimbursement rates should be increased to allow the program's tradition of excellent nutrition education to continue.

The final reimbursement rates adopted in 1996 for families with income over 185 percent of poverty were considerably lower than those initially proposed, and the new means test system, with these reduced rates, has had the unintended consequence of driving providers from the program. We need to adjust the system by raising the Tier 2 reimbursement rates to assure that they are at least minimally adequate to make it worthwhile for providers serving homes with a mix of children from low-income and middle-income families and homes serving middle-income children to participate in CACFP.

We also need to build on the successes to date of USDA's Management Improvement Initiative in strengthening and supporting CACFP by making the Initiative permanent, increasing funding, and including a focus on making program management more efficient and reducing barriers to participation. Paperwork is a significant barrier to participation in CACFP. Providers

need reasonable CACFP record-keeping requirements that allow accountability without being overwhelming.

Early Education Initiatives:

As early education initiatives have increased, so too has the importance of strengthening the federal food programs to support these efforts. If there is no provision for adequate nutrition, learning readiness is a hollow promise for children. Hungry or undernourished children can't learn and grow, nor do they feel secure and safe. A good mealtime not only provides good nutrition but also is a learning laboratory for many developmental tasks for young children. Federal nutrition programs and funds therefore are essential to the school readiness and child development goals that often underlie interest in expanding early education.

The school nutrition programs (school lunch and breakfast) and the summer food program, as well as the Child and Adult Care Food Program, can be used to feed young children and to support their education and healthy development in a variety of preschool settings. A number of barriers currently exist for some programs seeking to use the federal nutrition programs. For example, many preschool programs that operate all-day or year-round face significant barriers trying to patch the programs together to cover all the children all the time because the eligibility and operational requirements, including contracts, meal service options, meal pattern requirements and reimbursements, are all different for the different programs. Some of these barriers could be addressed by streamlining the National School Lunch Program, School Breakfast Program and CACFP to support the needs of children in school-based preschool programs by extending school meal program benefits year-round and to holidays, and including the option of a dinner and snack meal service without limiting eligibility or lowering reimbursements.

In addition, Congress needs to increase access to CACFP in child care centers and early education programs by making a number of other important changes. Extending categorical income eligibility to include State-supported Head Start and Even Start programs in addition to the federally-funded Head Start programs will smooth participation for State-funded programs. CACFP centers also should be allowed to offer the option of a third meal for children in child care centers for more than eight hours.

For-profit Centers:

As indicated earlier, making permanent the current temporary extension of CACFP eligibility to children in for-profit child care centers serving 25 percent or more low-income children will also help support early education efforts. Currently one half million children in for-profit centers rely on nutritious meals and snacks paid for by CACFP. The temporary rule giving CACFP eligibility to a for-profit child care center if 25 percent or more of its children are low-income has allowed this portion of the program to grow substantially. In the absence of this special rule, for-profit centers are not eligible for CACFP unless the state puts Title XX Social

Services Block Grant funds into the center to support at least one quarter of its children.

WIC

Pregnancy and early childhood are critical periods for good nutrition. The special importance of the WIC Program in preventing and treating nutrition problems during these critical periods has been widely recognized for almost three decades. But science in recent years has underlined the central importance of good nutrition – and hence, of WIC.

WIC currently serves 7.5 million low-income women, infants and children—in county health departments, hospitals, mobile clinics (vans), community centers, schools, public housing sites, migrant health centers, and Indian Health Service facilities. WIC professionals evaluate nutritional risk factors for each participant, provide a monthly food package and nutrition education (which includes instruction on breastfeeding and child development as it relates to feeding children) targeted to the participant's needs, and refer each participant to other necessary health care and social services.

Extensive research has demonstrated that WIC improves the health of nutritionally at risk low-income women, infants and children. WIC has improved prenatal care, pregnancy outcomes, anemia, nutritional intakes, and food security for millions of vulnerable women and children. This translates into improved quality of life, a foundation for long-term good health, and children entering school better able to learn. WIC services also translate into dollars saved in the federal budget and state budgets -- it has been estimated that every dollar spent on WIC results in savings of between \$1.77 and \$3.13 in Medicaid costs for newborns and their mothers.

We are very concerned that potentially eligible WIC participants have full access to the program and its services. We would like to raise three important issues that we believe could make a crucial difference in meeting this goal.

Certification periods for mothers and young children in WIC should be extended to one year. Currently, infants are certified for one year, but mothers and young children must be re-certified every six months. This leads to unnecessary clinic visits, lack of coordination with health care services, and unnecessary invasive blood work . This change would also allow for more counseling time and less paperwork.

Changing times make it essential for the WIC Program to improve program access for working families – through outreach, extended office hours, and out-stationed staff. More mothers of young children are working outside the home. Often their work hours are inflexible, and their ability to leave the workplace for health care and nutrition services is very limited. This situation requires WIC to make special efforts to provide program services when and where women and children can come.

WIC funding should ensure that the program continues to achieve excellent results through its nutrition education services. Many WIC programs do not have sufficient resources to fully fund important nutrition counseling and education.

Finally, we believe, for all the reasons cited in this testimony, that WIC should be structured to ensure that all eligible women, infants and young children are able to participate. This has been much discussed over the years, but inevitably runs into “cost constraints.” But given the proven success of WIC, its cost-effectiveness and its critical role in the lives of young children, if we can’t make WIC available to every eligible person in need of its services, our national priorities on where to spend money are misplaced. We think it is time for Congress to begin to seriously consider this question and the options that would allow all eligible people to participate.

Nutrition Education

The child nutrition programs present opportunities for positive modeling of healthy and nutritious meals, from birth through the teen years. To support and take full advantage of these opportunities, increased funding is essential to ensure the availability of effective nutrition education that teaches children, over the course of their preschool and school years, how to make healthy lifelong choices for themselves. Enhanced nutrition education funds could make nutrition education more possible in schools, family child care homes and child care centers, and in the WIC Program.

Homeless Children

Federal food programs provide important support to children in homeless and domestic violence shelters. It is critically important that barriers to the food programs be reduced for this at-risk population. A report released by the Urban Institute estimated that at least 2.3 million adults and children are likely to experience a spell of homelessness at least once during a year. Families with children represent the fastest growing segment of the homeless population, according to the National Coalition for the Homeless.

Homeless children are more likely to be hungry or undernourished than other children, including poor, housed children. Hungry or undernourished children are less healthy, less focused, and pay less attention in school, often resulting in educational and behavioral problems, exacerbating the deleterious effects of homelessness.

Homeless shelters, domestic violence shelters and some transitional housing providers can use the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program as a resource for feeding children. Unfortunately, however, there is a 12 year age limit on this CACFP component. This means that some children in families aren’t covered while other children in the same family are. It also means that teenage runaway shelters can not use the program. By allowing homeless and

domestic violence shelters to serve meals through CACFP to children up 18 years of age, rather than just up to 12 years old, Congress could significantly increase the reach of this valuable program.

Conclusion

In 1946, Congress passed the National School Lunch Act as a “measure of national security, to safeguard the health and well-being of the Nation’s children and to encourage the domestic consumption of nutritious agricultural commodities.” Since then, these goals have remained paramount, and Congress frequently has responded by improving the child nutrition programs—initiating and strengthening WIC, school breakfast, lunch, summer, child care food and afterschool food programs—to better serve children and families, and adjust to changes in our families, workplaces, schools, and communities. We at FRAC believe that the priorities raised in this testimony are key to continuing this effective and essential endeavor to help to ensure good nutrition and health for all our children.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak with you today. I welcome your questions and the chance to contribute to your deliberations on this year’s reauthorization of the child nutrition programs.